UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

Distr.
LIMITED

E/CN.17/1995/L.4
25 April 1995

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Third session
11-28 April 1995
Agenda item 6

REVIEW OF SECTORAL CLUSTER: LAND, DESERTIFICATION, FORESTS AND BIODIVERSITY

Draft decision submitted by the Chairman

Managing fragile ecosystems: combating desertification and drought

1. The Commission notes that some 1 billion people live in the rural areas of the world's drylands, which constitute one third of the land on Earth. They are at risk, and more than 100 million are already significantly affected and face having to abandon their lands and migrate. The Commission is concerned that, according to the report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.17/1995/4), the economic loss caused by desertification worldwide, in terms of average income foregone, was estimated in 1991 to be more than US$ 42 billion per year, most of it in Asia (US$ 20.9 billion per year) and Africa (US$ 9.3 billion per year). These figures are all the more alarming in Africa, where the affected countries rank among the poorest and least developed in the world.

2. Desertification and drought are closely interlinked with other issues such as loss of biodiversity, food security, population growth, poverty, climate change, water resources, deforestation, resource consumption patterns, deterioration of terms of trade, economics and, especially, social and cultural issues. Desertification is a social and economic, as well as an environmental problem. Drought and land degradation can occur in most climatic zones, affecting a large number of people. The Commission emphasizes the need to take action on the effects of drought and to recognize that land degradation also occurs in sub-humid and humid regions. Within the context of food security, combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought take on particular significance.

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3. The Commission welcomes the timely conclusion of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, 1/ urges all Governments to recognize the urgent need for its early signature, ratification and entry into force, and to support the resolution on urgent action for Africa, 2/ adopted by the General Assembly, as well as to promote actions in other regions. Implementation of the programme areas of Agenda 21 3/ should be carried out in the context of the Convention, including its regional annexes. The Commission urges Governments and intergovernmental organizations to give strong political support to the first meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention, to be held once the Convention has been ratified by at least 50 countries, and to support fully the work of the interim secretariat in preparing for the first meeting of the Conference of Parties.

4. The Commission underlines the importance of the following features of the Convention:

(a) The open, participatory approach, based on active work at the local level and the particularly important contribution of women;

(b) The need for improved donor coordination and the establishment of partnerships between Governments in donor and affected countries, and the active involvement of non-governmental organizations;

(c) The integrated, that is, global and multidisciplinary, approach, emphasizing the importance of the links between land and water management; and the role of energy, in particular new and renewable sources of energy, as well as the role of socio-economic factors and the need to combat poverty;

(d) The need for an active role of science in improving the situation in the drylands, and in humid and sub-humid areas.

5. The Commission urges Governments to take an integrated approach to combating desertification, taking into account the link between desertification and poverty and the need for low-cost [but cost-efficient] environmentally sound technologies for sustainable development. Sectoral strategic framework plans need to be consolidated within overall national planning and budgeting frameworks. The Commission draws the attention of Governments to the potential for the Convention to provide an in-country coordinating mechanism for integrated land management in arid, semi-arid and sub-humid lands.

1/ A/49/84/Add.2, annex, appendix II.

2/ Ibid., appendix III, resolution 5/1.

3/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.

6. In order to be fully effective, the Convention needs to be better known. The Commission therefore emphasizes that, despite the increased understanding of desertification and drought issues, there is a continuing need to raise public awareness of the issues. The Commission urges Governments to enhance awareness among policy makers and the public at large through national institutions in the framework of the Convention, and of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, and through the observance of the International Day for Combating Desertification, on 17 June of every year.

7. The Commission stresses the need for the mobilization of financial resources, inter alia, as called for by the relevant provisions of the Convention (articles 6, 20 and 21) and needed for its implementation, particularly in Africa. The Commission recommends that appropriate organizations of the United Nations system take steps to facilitate the financing of programmes and projects in dry and sub-humid areas. The Commission urges developed countries to agree on coherent policies and adequate resource allocations for fulfilling their commitments towards the implementation of the Convention.

8. The Commission notes that the wealth of information, knowledge and experience concerning the causes and effects of desertification and drought that are already available allow for action to be stepped up immediately. Measures that assist information-sharing (e.g., workshops) should be encouraged. The Commission also considers that the need for substantial improvement and better use of existing scientific knowledge of the problem is fundamental to further improving understanding of the significance of desertification and drought. Meeting this need would involve improved monitoring to provide data collection for desertification assessment and early warning of drought, as well as the improvement of capacities to facilitate access to and application of this information by land users. A more precise understanding of the desertification issue would involve concerted activities, including consultations with major groups, at the national level in affected countries, and the recognition by Governments of its importance, that is, a cross-sectoral effort involving physical, social, humanitarian and economic factors.

9. The Commission recognizes that the strengthening of national capacities is central to combating desertification and drought. The Commission urges affected countries, regional and subregional organizations:

(a) To take effective action to set up institutional arrangements and policy frameworks for developing, managing and implementing national strategies and action programmes, incorporating provision for active public participation, especially among those most affected;

(b) To encourage Governments to improve national coordination among agencies in order to implement measures for combating desertification and managing drought more effectively and for the sustainable use of natural resources, given the cross-cutting nature of these issues;

(c) To establish, as a matter of highest priority, coordinating arrangements and to create partnerships with donors and national stakeholders, within the context of the Convention.

10. The Commission recognizes the importance of preserving the knowledge of farmers and indigenous and local people concerning dryland management and survival strategies. Their full involvement in the sustainable development of these drylands - their homelands - needs to be ensured. In this regard, the Commission notes with satisfaction that the principle of allowing more effective participation of local people, especially farmers, through their representative organizations in the planning and development of their natural resources is being more willingly accepted in many affected countries. It also takes note of the fact that many organizations, especially non-governmental organizations, have stepped up their participatory approaches with the inclusion of marginalized and disadvantaged groups, especially women, in the dryland development process.

11. The Commission takes note of the statement in the report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.17/1995/4) to the effect that United Nations organizations have already taken steps to align their drought and desertification activities in accordance with Agenda 21. Further agreements on the system-wide division of labour and proposals on further partnership arrangements between agencies (and corresponding targeted work plans) are needed. The Commission recommends that these organizations further define their roles, comparative advantages, cooperative mechanisms, level of intervention and corresponding resource allocations in the implementation of the Convention.